Study Abroad Surprises

Study Abroad Training

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If you study abroad in high school or university, there are many things that might surprise you. What crazy new things do you imagine encountering?

Rambutan.

The Sourtoe Coctail. Picture by Richard Galloway.

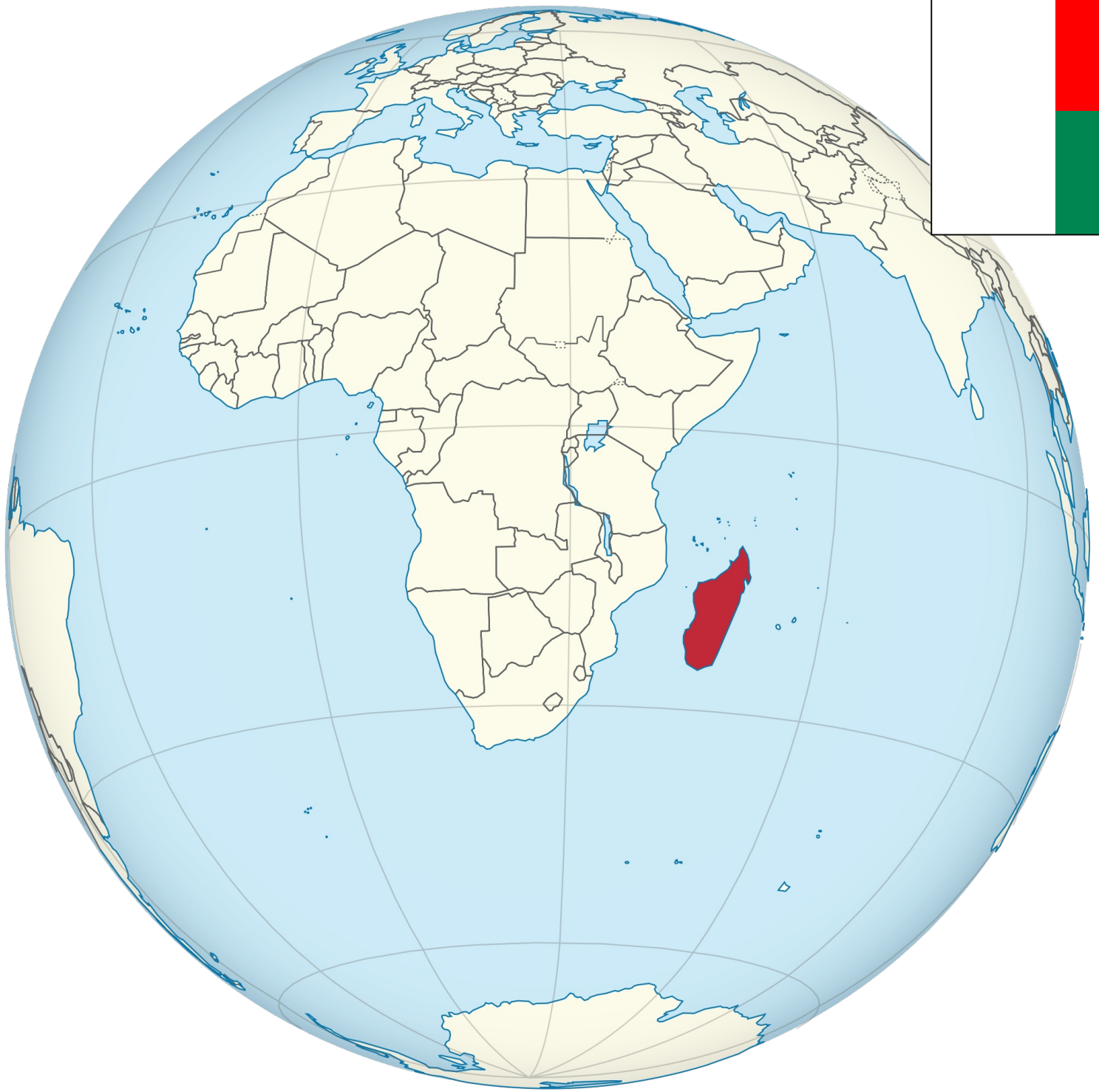
Armadillo.

Petra.

Surprising Stories

Sometimes you do something that feels normal to you, but other people react as though you did something strange. It could be a word, gesture, or action. The situation gets weird, but you don’t know why.

Let’s look at some real examples of American college students abroad. Can you guess what happened?



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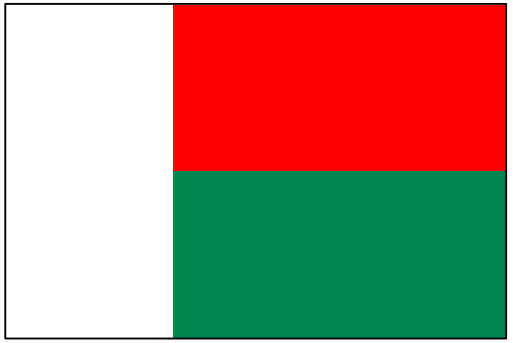
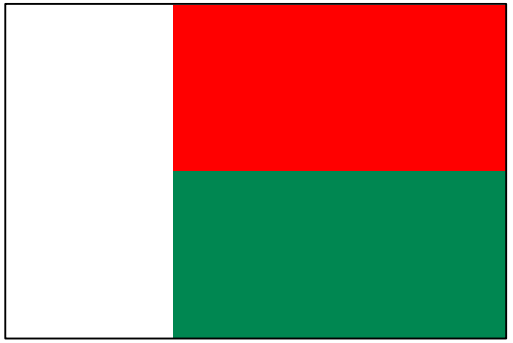
Madagascar Incident

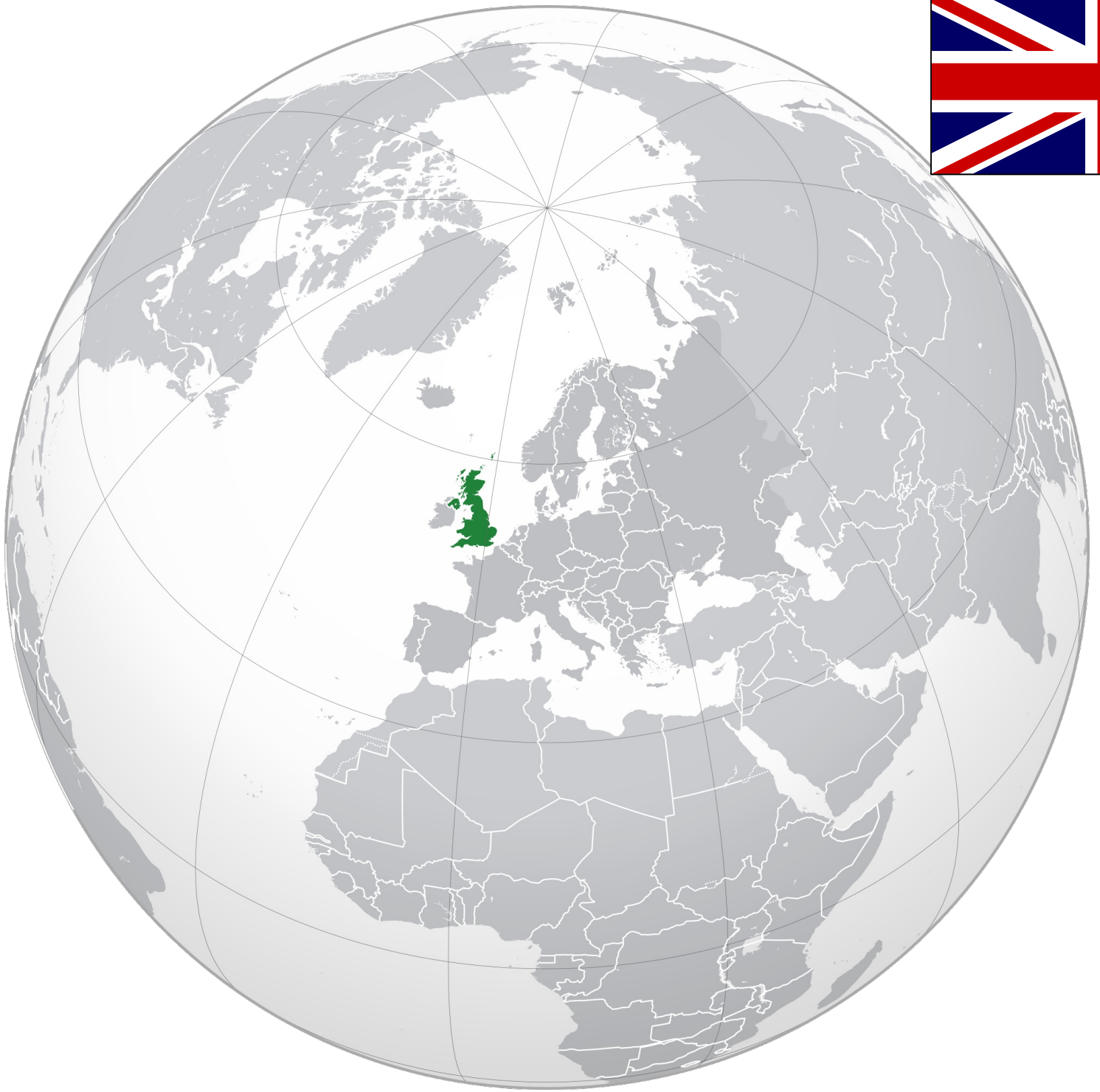


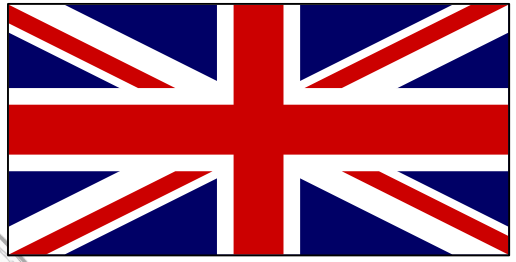
(Female, 21 years old) It was a soul-wrenching heat on the southern tip of Madagascar in February. The tribal people walk an average of twelve kilometers a day to retrieve water in the desert! Whenever I got up to walk to the bathroom, which was a cactus of my choice, a five-minute walk from the huts, my face would burn from the relentless western setting sun. At dinner one night, for some reason my host family started screaming anger and chaos, every once in a while pointing at me. I couldn’t understand what they were saying. I guess I created some problem. How?

Madagascar Explained



(Female, 21 years old) I lived with the Malagasy people, and they are very spiritual. They worship their ancestors several times a day. The earth that holds their ancestors' bones is considered sacred. When I was going to the bathroom, I walked west from the houses, into the special area where their ancestors were buried. Essentially, I had relieved myself on their ancestors' souls! I should have gone east, and not west. From then on, when I had to go to the bathroom, I was led by the hand of my host brothers and sisters. Fair enough!





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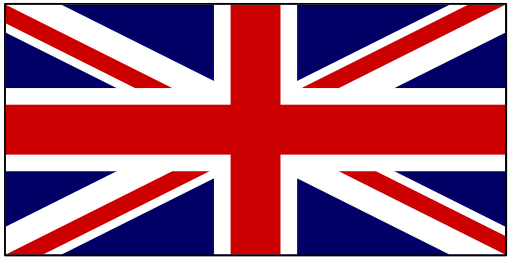
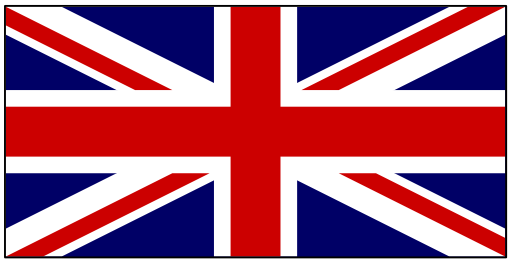
England Incident



(Female, 20 years old) I'm a napkin person. At every meal I tend to use a lot of napkins … say anywhere from 3-5, depending on whether the napkins are flimsy paper or cloth. Out at a restaurant, I never seem to have enough napkins. I always ask for more napkins. While in London I ate out often and I noticed that every time I asked the waiter or waitress for “more napkins” I got funny looks. I felt as if I had asked for something dirty or disgusting. People knew what I meant, and always handed me more napkins. But they seemed to give me a weird look.

Adapted from What's Up with Culture from the School for International Studies at University of the Pacific.

England Explained



(Female, 20 years old) Who says English is the same in the U.S. and the U.K.? In England the word “napkin” is typically used to describe a feminine hygiene product (sanitary napkin). The item used at the dinner table is usually called a “serviette”, although most people in the U.K. are aware of the double meaning. I found this out until my third week in London when I was attending an orientation meeting for overseas students through the university and they went over some common problems Americans have while in London. Boy, was my face red!

If you live abroad long enough, you’re going to have experiences like this. It’s embarrassing, but it’s normal, and it makes for a good story to share with friends later.

Travel Reading

What was your best trip or vacation?

(Douglas) I love to travel, so it’s hard to choose. However, for nature, the two summers I lived in Alaska were amazing. Everything up there is big and beautiful, and it’s breathtaking. Another cool place I visited is Petra, in Jordan. It’s an old city built into the rock, and it feels magical. My most notable vacation must have been the summer I hiked the Appalachian Trail. It was a 2,200-mile hike from Georgia to Maine that took a little over three months.

What was your worst trip or vacation?

(Amber) My worst trip was when I was traveling back to Australia from Japan. My plane stopped in Guangzhou, China for a layover, but my flight kept getting canceled! I had to stay in the airport for nearly 9 hours, without any food or battery on my phone – I didn’t have much money, so all I could buy was a drink and a small bag of candy. After the 9 hours, I was exhausted, hungry, and angry!

Do you prefer summer or winter vacations?

(Geff) I prefer winter vacations because I like hiking and traveling when it’s cold outside. I’m from the Philippines, and it’s always so warm there every day. Back home, I have a small fan beside my bed to help me sleep comfortably at night. Now that I’m in Japan, I get to enjoy the snow and the cold weather during winter. I hope to visit Hokkaido and experience snowboarding and skiing soon.

What was your best trip or vacation?

(Janelle) I have a list of ‘must bring’ items. The list includes my passport, money or credit cards, and more. My passport and money are necessary for traveling overseas. Pawpaw ointment is great for using as a lip balm and a moisturizer. A water bottle and a phone with internet access are probably obvious choices, but my lucky bracelet goes everywhere with me and helps me to stay happy when things aren’t going as smoothly as I might like.

Travel Writing

Answer 4+ questions.

1. What was the best vacation or trip of your life?
2. What was the worst vacation or trip of your life?
3. Do you prefer summer or winter vacations?
4. Have you ever been to a foreign country?
5. Do you prefer to travel by train, bus, plane or ship?
6. Have you ever been in a difficult situation while traveling?
7. What are some things that you always take with you on a trip?
8. Have you ever gotten lost while traveling? What happened?